

## pressdemocrat.com

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

### Service groups cling to fireworks sales

By [MARTIN ESPINOZA](#)  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Wednesday, June 30, 2010 at 7:55 p.m.

The Fourth of July is a dilemma for the Early Learning Institute, a Rohnert Park-based non-profit agency that serves families with young children, many of them kids with special needs.

Even as some local fire officials decry the dangers of "safe and sane" fireworks, hard economic times are causing organizations such as the Early Learning Institute to rely more heavily on sales of the pyrotechnics.

"It's 50 percent of our fund-raising per year," said Michele Rogers, executive director of the institute.

Rogers said the organization's state funding, which had remained flat for eight years, was cut by three percent last year. Sales at fireworks booths — still legal in Rohnert Park — generates \$12,000 to \$15,000 a year for the group.

"How are we going to serve those kids if we can't fund raise," she said. "We can't all do wine-tastings."

Fireworks are illegal in Sonoma County except in the cities of Rohnert Park, Sebastopol, Cloverdale and Petaluma. Lakeport is the only place in Mendocino and Lake counties where fireworks sales are allowed.

Cyndi Foreman, a fire prevention officer for the Rincon Valley Fire Protection, said she is "empathetic" to the financial pressures currently felt by the Sonoma County's nonprofit groups. "However, ultimately our job is to protect the community and the residents in that community."

Foreman cites statistics from the National Fire Protection Association that show hospital emergency rooms in the United States treated 7,000 fireworks-related injuries in 2008. That year, fireworks were linked to 22,500 fires, including 1,400 structure fires and 500 vehicle fires.

Sparklers, fountains and other novelty fireworks alone accounted for 32 percent of emergency room visits in 2008, according to the association.

On Wednesday, a Marin County general contractor who asked that only his first name, Joe, be used, stopped at the fireworks booth in front of the CVS Pharmacy parking lot in Rohnert Park. One of 16 such booths in the city, it is operated by the North Bay Active 20—30 Club and the newly formed Sebastopol Active 20—30 Club.

Joe bought a small, \$20 package of fireworks with sparklers, fountains and morning glories. He said he couldn't pass up the opportunity to buy a few fireworks for his two kids, even though he knows that using them in Marin County is illegal.



CHRISTOPHER CHUNG/The Press Democrat

Sam Mahnken purchases fireworks for the Fourth of July at the Early Learning Institute's fireworks booth in Rohnert Park on Wednesday.



"I have to be kind of sneaky about this," he said, adding that families should be allowed to use fireworks in areas, such as parks, that are monitored by fire prevention specialists.

"If people really want to, there's ways to do this," he said.

Fireworks sales are the biggest fundraiser for the North Bay Active 20-30 Club, which also provides financial support to the Early Learning Institute.

Samantha Mineo, president of the Sebastopol club, said Wednesday that the proceeds from sales of fireworks go to a national program called Kidspre, a back-to-school project that benefits local kids from Rohnert Park, western Sonoma County and Petaluma. Selected kids get a \$150 gift certificate for clothes, a backpack full of school supplies and a community breakfast.

Mineo said legal fireworks can be safe as long as parents and adults act responsibly with their children, just as they hopefully would when taking them to a swimming pool. She said she hopes the fireworks controversy does not eliminate a crucial funding source.

"I hope they don't ever go away."

Santa Rosa Fire Battalion Chief Mark Basque said fire officials this weekend will be looking for fireworks purchased outside the city.

"They bring them into the city limits and it does create the problem," he said. "If he lives in Santa Rosa, he's violating the law and putting himself and his neighbors at risk."

In Cloverdale, non-profit groups that sell fireworks include the Lions Club and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, said Anthony Michalek, a firefighter engineer with the Cloverdale Fire Protection District.

Tom Jordan, president of the Clear Lake High School Booster Club, said fireworks sales in the past have raised about \$40,000 a year for four Lakeport youth groups, supplying roughly half their budgets.

The money is used for off-campus enrichment activities and to help maintain the city's swimming pool year-round, he said.

In Sonoma County cities where they are legally sold, fireworks can only be discharged on July 4.

Copyright © 2010 PressDemocrat.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.